

Alhambra: You Deserve A Break Today

By
Gary Frueholz, Dilbeck Real Estate

“You deserve a break today”, is one of the most successful and profitable slogans in the history of advertising.

The catchy phrase captured the notion of mothers being given a day off from cooking in appreciation of their everyday hard work.

The genius marketing campaign was developed by McDonald’s and Ray Kroc. It would become one of the longest running advertising slogans in American history spanning over four decades.

And Alhambra would have its place in McDonald’s folklore.

Alhambra’s original McDonald’s at 909 East Main Street was one of the first McDonald’s constructed.

Alhambra City records show that the permits for this McDonald’s were pulled in the Spring of 1953 and the Certificate of Occupancy was given on September 1, 1953 (Certificate of Occupancy number 2489).

I recently called McDonald’s Corporate Customer Care Center and spoke to Ken Hall. Mr. Hall confirmed that the McDonald’s at 909 East Main Street was the *fifth McDonald’s franchise* to be opened. McDonald’s records show it was formally opened on October 1, 1953.

A woman named Harriett C. Charlson is listed by McDonald’s as the initial franchise owner. And the name H.C. Charlson shows up on all Alhambra permits as the owner of the restaurant.

The original McDonald’s in San Bernardino was owned by two brothers with that name. Initially the McDonald brothers issued nine franchises. Alhambra was one of the original nine.

By 1954 the McDonald brothers would enlist the aid of Ray Kroc, a salesman who directed national franchising of malt mixer machines for restaurants. By the late 1950’s McDonald’s and Kroc were franchising over 100 new restaurants a year.

McDonald's now has over 33,000 restaurants in 118 countries (June 2012). But Alhambra's East Main Street McDonald's was the fifth franchised restaurant opened.

Alhambra's original McDonald's on East Main Street displayed the two classic golden arches erected over the building. In front of the restaurant was one additional golden arch with a rendering of a chef highlighted in neon lights who had a hamburger for a face. The friendly chef was nick named Speedee. Speedee held a sign that proclaimed "15 cents", presumably for a hamburger.

Speedee had greater significance than just being cute. This mascot of the original McDonald's presented a profound message that good food was served fast. McDonald's kept their menus at first very simple and this facilitated quick economical walk up service.

What Henry Ford did for the automotive assembly line, McDonald's did for the developing fast food industry. Workers specialized in cooking roles, taking orders, and quality control became a standard.

Speedee remained the company mascot until 1962, when he was replaced by Ronald McDonald. One reason for the change was McDonald's wanted to remove any comparison to Alka-Seltzer's mascot, also named Speedy.

The building on East Main Street was simple. There was no interior area for customers. They walked up to the window and gave their order and were quickly served. Young couples in Alhambra could take the family out to dinner and not impose their rambunctious children on other patrons in the restaurant.

I can recall my Little League team here in Alhambra, the Max West Kiwees, celebrating victories at McDonald's. It was an institution designed for working-class families and their children. As Walt Disney redefined the concept of an amusement park to be a wholesome family experience, so McDonald's transformed the notion of the hamburger stand.

Like most early McDonald's rows of red and white tile wrapped around the building on East Main Street. The roof had a 1950ish mid century look of being flat and slightly angled upward approaching the front. The roof provided an element of shade as customers stood in line and ordered.

Since Alhambra's original McDonald's was part of the original nine franchises awarded by the McDonald brothers, it was not subject to modernization requirements that McDonald's Corporation placed on its franchises given out by Ray Kroc. However, the original restaurant would be leveled more than once and rebuilt from the ground up.

On June 18, 1953 the City of Alhambra issued a rather unusual building permit for the McDonald's property on East Main Street. Permit number 50038 allowed the contractor to attach some additional elements to the restaurant being constructed. The description of the work being added by the permit states "steel arches decorative attached to building".

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Gary Frueholz is a realtor with Dilbeck Real Estate, a past member of the Alhambra Planning Commission, a certified Senior Real Estate Specialist, and can be reached at 626-318-9436.